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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000735

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SUBJECT: FOLLOW UP TO THE CAIRO SPEECH: ENGAGING WITH THE MUSLIMS
OF BANGLADESH

REF: STATE 71325

Summary and Recommendations

1. (U) Muslims in Bangladesh have shown great enthusiasm for following up with the U.S. on many of the themes unveiled in the President's Cairo speech. Mission Dhaka recommends the following areas of opportunity to foster dialogue with Muslims here:

-- Bring the Peace Corps Back to Bangladesh. The Peace Corps, pulled from Bangladesh in 2006, is precisely the effective, multifaceted U.S. engagement our interlocutors encourage.

-- Increase the number of Americans who visit Bangladesh. Our focus groups all stated that increased contact with Americans would increase understanding and enhance the U.S. image in Bangladesh. This includes visits from U.S. Government officials to "everyday Americans" including educators, sport figures, local religious leaders, and youth.

-- Continue working with the madrassas, both Qaumi and Aliah. As the number of madrassas continues to increase across Bangladesh, we need to continue to engage madrassa students and teachers to foster more positive dialogue. The Embassy sponsored English-language training offered to madrassa English teachers, curriculum work with the Madrassa Training Institute (MTI), and U.S. Government-funded speakers/groups visiting madrassas and discussing education issues should be continued and expanded.

-- Science and Technology mentorship programs. Participants encouraged the U.S. to establish mentorship programs between promising young (22-35) professionals in the science and technology fields and U.S.-based mentors. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs is currently sponsoring a program linking young women professionals from the NEA region with mentors in the U.S. This program, under a grant totaling about \$350,000, involves two-way exchanges focusing on practical, scientific approaches to addressing issues like food security and global warming. Such a program would greatly benefit Bangladesh.

-- USAID programs should, to the extent possible, include local imams and religious leaders. For example, bringing in a local imam to the opening of a newly-opened health clinic, meeting the staff and touring the facilities may be a highly effective way to assure the local populace that the clinic is a safe place to go. Also, conducting programs at a clinic engaged in women's healthcare to male religious leaders in a Koran/Muslim-centric way could greatly increase the success of such endeavors. USAID's "Leaders of Influence" program is already doing most of these activities.

-- Broaden the message from the U.S. Mission: Participants said that

they see the U.S. Mission as playing an active role on issues directly affecting Bangladesh. However, they encouraged Mission staff to also speak about other issues affecting the U.S. image abroad, especially among Bangladesh's 140 million Muslim majority. This includes discussions about U.S. efforts to solve the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, issues surrounding Iran, and continuing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, some participants noted that it is widely known that the U.S. opposes Iran's development of nuclear weapons. Fewer Bangladeshis understand or are aware that the President has also initiated negotiations with Russia to reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Focus group participants suggested that presenting this sort of broader information shows that the President "will practice what he preaches" on key issues of interest. End Summary.

Methodology/Discussion: Roundtables

12. (U) Mission Dhaka conducted thematic consultations per reftel with key local contacts to discuss the speech and seek opinions/ideas on ways the U.S. could further enhance our engagement in Muslim-majority Bangladesh. An American Public Affairs Officer chaired each of three focus groups. Participants included representatives from civil society organizations, government employees, business leaders, academics, NGO leaders and the media.

13. (U) The first roundtable focused on science, technology and entrepreneurship issues. The participants examined areas where the U.S. could engage Bangladesh in a way that is different from the donor model for assistance. First, participants stated that the U.S. could help increase the use of Information Technology (IT) in education. Working through public-private partnerships, the U.S. Government, large companies and NGOs could expand access to

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Internet-based learning for students throughout Bangladesh. Another area where the USG could assist would be facilitating access to academic journals to university students. While many were published on the Internet, they were not always affordable. This information could be shared via a web-based portal with registered students and faculty. The third area that the group emphasized was encouraging Americans to visit Bangladesh. This could be through expanding existing programs or creating new programs, like a science fellow program. One major question was whether the Peace Corps could return to Bangladesh to work in areas such as education, sanitation/water resources and electrification.

14. (U) The second roundtable focused on women's education and empowerment, health, and development issues. In this roundtable, participants discussed women's education, as well as primary education generally, and the economic role of women. They also discussed the economic and social effects of climate change in Bangladesh. They identified poverty as the main factor causing girls and ethnic minorities to drop out of school (in order to support their families). Participants discussed how poor families often enroll their children in madrassas because madrassas will house and feed students and provide a social safety net to the families. Participants agreed that the social and economic status of women was improving in Bangladesh. The rise of the garment industry had accelerated social change by bringing women into the workforce, they said. Priorities for future empowerment programs should include improving education and vocational skills training, and reducing violence against women and early marriage. Finally, participants were very concerned about the future impact of climate change, and stressed that rising sea levels would affect all development projects, causing massive displacement and resulting in human rights problems. This topic resulted in the most concrete ideas for involving the international community. Participants wanted to see an exchange program or international conference that would bring together those working on coastal management and the effects on humans of climate change, from both the scientific and social perspectives. They also requested USG assistance to make a short film that could be shown to those in danger of displacement to raise awareness about climate change and explain the necessity of future relocation. Last, they wanted to increase exchange programs in science and technology to ensure that more scientists receive

training to help Bangladesh deal with climate change.

15. (U) The third roundtable centered on faith groups and interfaith issues. All of the participants applauded the Cairo speech and its intent. They also welcomed the Embassy invitation to offer their opinions to the U.S. government. By itself, this consultation approach was new to them and an indication of a new era. The group's primary recommendation was that the Embassy must engage with imams and madrassa leaders (both Aliah and Qaumi) in a much more direct way. The participants pointed out that a huge percentage of the population is illiterate, and much of their information and intellectual guidance comes from imams at Friday prayers. While rural villagers may not have access to a TV or radio (much less the internet) their weekly attendance at prayers is a near certainty, and the imam's weekly message carries a great deal of weight. U.S. involvement, dialogue, and partnerships with imams and other religious figures will therefore do more to foster a better image and relationship than almost anything.

Comment

16. (U) Overall, participants across government, academia, civil society and the private sector continue to be very receptive to the President's Cairo speech. From these consultations, it is clear that the President's speech resulted in widespread goodwill within Bangladesh. The challenge is to expand and deepen our outreach efforts throughout the country, especially to raise awareness of the many U.S. Government programs already in place that are now working directly on the issues highlighted by our focus groups. Post can amplify its efforts with the practical suggestions derived from this initial dialogue. These focus groups have allowed the Embassy to establish good working groups to continue this outreach in the months to come.

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